

The main issue affecting social cohesion in the Hamdaniya district appears to be the fear of a dramatic demographic change in the community, as the proportion of Christians in the center of Hamdaniya (Qaraqosh and Bartella) dwindles, in part due to the continuous Christian migration to other countries or other parts of Iraq. At the same time, members of the Shabak and Kakai communities have increasingly taken up residence in Qaraqosh and Bartella. This issue creates tension and hinders efforts to restore social cohesion and strengthen relations between communities in the aftermath of the Islamic State (IS) era.



This project aims to address these issues, evaluate current policies, and suggest new policies to build trust between ethnic and religious communities in the area.

Findings:

This research is part of the larger USAID-funded project, "Support to Traditional Cultural Practices in Northern Iraq", which attempts to promote social cohesion in the Hamdaniya district. Critical data was collected through 43 semi-structured interviews between February and March 2023 in Qaraqosh, Bartella, and adjacent villages. Interviewees heard from influential actors, including political leaders, community leaders, religious figures, and civil society activists, in particular young activists. In addition, further data was collected through an accountability session held in the Hamdaniya district on March 14, 2023, with the participation of 21 key figures from all communities, including Christians, Shabaks, Kakais, and Turkmen. The collected data shows that issues related to demographic change in Qaraqosh and Bartella have created serious tension between the communities of the region, especially between Christians and Shabaks.

Key Takeaways

- The constant fear by Christians of the demographic change in Hamdaniya is the main cause of tension between the Christian community and others, especially Shabaks.
- After the defeat of IS in 2017, the tension between Christians and Shabaks increased.
- Ultimately, the goal should be to resolve the issues related to Christians' fear of demographic change. This cannot be done without the effective involvement of the government, at both national and local levels.
- Several key recommendations will help guide establishment of peace in Hamdaniya

The main source of tension we identified is the Christian community's fear of demographic change in Qaraqosh and Bartella, especially in light of increasing demands of members of the Shabak and Kakai communities for the right to relocate from surrounding villages to cities of Christian identity and majority. The study also observed a widespread mistrust of the Sunni community and the neighboring Sunni villages which are believed to have collaborated with IS. As a result, the team observed feuds and constant tension between minority communities and Sunni Arabs, especially in the years since IS' defeat.

What is to be done in Hamdaniya?

The government should intervene to reduce the negative effects of demographic change and solve the identified issues through new policies, legislation, and regulation. The proposed policies are:

Establish new administrative units for Shabaks, especially in the Bazwaya, Baybokh, and Kabarli districts, and another special district for Shabaks in the castle area in the Bazwaya region. This governmental approach, if adopted, might solve many of the problems related to ownership, land disputes, and the issue of demographic change. If Shabaks have an administrative area to acquire land and construct houses, they may renounce their claims to reside in the major Christian cities. This might alleviate tensions over demographic shifts. This can be achieved in agreement with Christians and Shabak community leaders, as well as youth.

Adopt strategic projects in agriculture and industry that provide job opportunities for young people. This boost in employment would help address migration and demographic change.

Implement laws that bring justice for victims of IS and families of martyrs: This could include laws regarding compensation for those affected and granting land to the families of martyrs.

Repeal laws that hurt peaceful coexistence, such as the recent law banning alcoholic beverages.

Mutual visits should be encouraged between communities, by community leaders, educated people, and religious figures, especially to social events and religious celebrations of different ethno-religious communities, when these events are open to outsider visits. Positive contact will help heal wounds and reestablish ties.

Organize summer camps for youth: Government engagement and financial support in summer education and summer school activities would continue these opportunities to promote interaction among youth.

Develop special awareness programs on social media that encourage peaceful speech and dissuade speech supporting conflict and disharmony. This requires government participation in developing legal disincentives, and deterrent policies.

Establish neutral media channels, radio, and television stations: There is a need for media channels that represent and broadcast to all communities and that emphasize social cohesion and peace.

Reform the councils of notables by attracting young people as well as women and utilizing and recruiting intellectuals, specialists, and degree holders such as lawyers. More youth and women will help tackle many issues concerning peaceful coexistence, as they have more willingness to admit problems and have the vision and willingness to identify issues and find deep-rooted solutions.

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Photo: Accountability Session in Hamdaniya district (credit: research team)

